

“Sexual Purity”

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

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Text Comment

In this following section Paul returns to the matter of sexual immorality that he has dealt with in 5:1-12, in connection with the specific case of the man living in an incestuous relationship with his step-mother and which he has raised generally in his list of sins both in 5:11 and 6:9.

Apparently, as will become clear in vv. 15-17, the specific problem being addressed is that of consorting with prostitutes. Apparently, some men in the church were going to prostitutes *and arguing that they had a right to do so*. Apparently their argument was that, having been raised by Christ above the plain of the mundane and worldly, living now in the realm of the Spirit, they were unaffected by behavior that had only to do with the body. [Fee, 250-251] Paul is going to make a direct attack on that reasoning.

- v.12 You will notice that the editors of the NIV, following almost all commentators, put the statement, “Everything is permissible for me” in quotation marks. That is, this was the Corinthians’ slogan and Paul is quoting it back to them. He repeats it again in 10:23, once more to take issue with it or, at least, with the way the Corinthians were applying it. It is possible that they took the phrase over from Paul himself, but then, as people will do, took it out of context and divorced it from other theological and ethical considerations. They made it absolute when Paul would have qualified it in various ways. Paul does not seem to reject the saying outright. There is a new freedom in Christ that liberates Christians from many human restrictions, but that freedom is, of course, to be practiced in loyalty to Christ and in the service of his purposes in our lives. [Witherington, 167-168]
- v.14 These remarks do not at first glance seem apropos of the subject Paul is discussing, but, in fact, they are. The Corinthians, or some of them, apparently were arguing this way: just as food is for the stomach and *vice versa* (and, after all, God is going to destroy them both, as belonging to this world), and since one bodily appetite is much the same as another, well, then, sex is for the body and the body is for sex. And Paul’s reply is that this is a capital *theological* mistake: the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord and it is not destined for destruction but for resurrection and eternal life, the proof of which is Christ’s own resurrection. [Fee, 255] Like so many Greeks in that day, they still maintained a philosophical prejudice against the body, against the physical dimension of life, and found it easier to believe that salvation would be a “spiritual” matter and only be completed when the soul was divested of the body. No, says Paul, the body also is the object of God’s saving love and Christ’s saving work. It too is being sanctified for God’s sake.
- v.17 It is a tightly compacted argument, to be sure, but you get the gist. There is a kind of union that happens between the believer and Christ and between a man and a prostitute who engage in sex. These “unions” are mutually exclusive, you cannot have both. You

cannot take your body that you have joined to Christ's body through his resurrection on your behalf and join that to a prostitute. The physical body counts; it is the object of Christ's saving love, it has been sanctified along with the soul through union with Christ. It is inconceivable then that it should be united to the body of a prostitute. Our union with Christ is of a different kind, of course, it is of the spirit, not the kind of union that sex creates, but it is a very real union nonetheless and must not be betrayed. The believer's body is joined to and belongs to the Lord's. Therefore, it cannot be joined to the body of a prostitute.

- v.18 This text has long puzzled Christians because, after all, it seems obvious that there are other sins, besides sexual immorality, that are both committed inside the body and against one's own body. Drunkenness comes to mind, as do smoking oneself into lung cancer, drug abuse, gluttony, and, especially, suicide. The simplest solution is to say that Paul means only that there is a special sense in which sinful sexual union is a sin against one's own body because of the point he has just made about the way in which it effects union with another body and so a betrayal of its union with the Lord. No other sins have quite this effect.
- v.20 The argument is two-fold: *first*, you have an obligation to keep the temple of the Lord pure and your body is that temple; and, *second*, your body is not your own to do with as you please. It belongs to God and you must serve *him* with it.

The Greco-Roman world was in many respects very like our world today. And it was like ours in this way also: it was highly sexualized and sexual activity of various kinds was practiced with little regard for the sanctity of the marriage bed. But, then, there has never been a time in human history in which the sexual dimension of life has not been troubled profoundly by the sinful desires and practices of fallen human beings. Man has never controlled himself sexually and he has always expressed his rebellion against God in sexual ways. The Bible contains a record of sexual sin from its earliest pages to its last. And, as in biblical times and as in Corinth in Paul's day, so now, one of the most wrenching adjustments that often must be made when a person becomes a Christian is this revolution in sexual matters, in thinking and in practice, that love for God and loyalty to Christ require.

And, as with other favorite sins that bedevil human life, reasons will be given, a defense of the practice will be mounted. In Corinth, in Paul's day, a philosophical prejudice against the material world and the physical side of human beings – a prejudice deeply rooted in Greek philosophy and culture – was exploited. If the life of the spirit and the world of ideas are what really matter, then what one does with one's body is of little consequence. That was the argument that even some Corinthian Christians were making. It was an argument they took over from their culture in order to justify the sexual practices they were used to and enjoyed.

In our day a different set of reasons is likely to be offered. Some reasons will derive from the naturalizing, the domesticating of sexual sin that was given impetus in the work of Freud. Surely something so natural, so instinctual cannot be wrong. We get this constantly from the side of those who wish to bring condom distribution into the public schools, whose platform seems to be

that teenagers are, sexually speaking, rutting animals and insofar as there is no way to control behavior that is so natural and so instinctual, it is better simply to regulate and sanitize it.

Some of the argument will be derived from the almost universal acceptance in our culture of the pursuit of pleasure as the sacred right of human beings. “How?” they will ask, “can something that feels so good, be wrong?” Others will defend sexual promiscuity of various kinds as businessmen. They will point to the immense amounts of money that can be made in our culture by pandering to man’s lower passions. Others will stand on the soapbox and worry aloud about the injustice of judging consensual acts. Is this not a free country?

None of these, of course, is a Christian argument, just as the argument used by some Corinthian Christians was not a Christian argument. But it had been taken over by Christians and that is what is happening today. When I was in Holland in 1984, I had a conversation about sexual ethics with a seminary student who was helping me learn to read Dutch. We had come across the subject in something we were reading together that day. He was frankly nonplussed by my contention that sexual activity outside of marriage was universally wrong and destructive to human well-being. He thought sex was natural and that, therefore, it was unnatural and harmful psychologically to force oneself to forego it. He didn’t get that from the Bible, but it was a conviction by then so deeply rooted in his culture that it was hard for him to conceive of another way of looking at the question. Don’t dismiss his viewpoint as so obviously wrong. It is not far from the view of evangelical Christians who are promiscuous. They are counting on God to forgive them. What is that, really, but a Greek form of thinking? The spirit is what counts, not the body. And if we are with God in spirit, it won’t matter so much what we do with our bodies.

The Christian view of sex, the biblical requirement of purity or chastity – which is to say, sexual abstinence outside of marriage and the full enjoyment of erotic pleasure within marriage – which had for so long been the “official” and “public” ethic of Western Civilization – however much betrayed in private – has so completely disintegrated in modern Western culture that it has become a difficult thing for people any longer *even to understand* the biblical view of sex, much less embrace it for themselves.

When I give my chapel messages at Covenant High School, I look out over those fresh faces and realize that the world they take to be normal is a very different world even than that in which I grew up just a generation ago. When I was in high school there was presented to teenagers a solid wall of opposition to sex outside of marriage. Your public school teacher told you it was wrong; my goodness, even a TV sit-com told you it was wrong. Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore didn’t even sleep in a double bed in the 1960s! Now, the TV sit-com tells you it is right, entirely normal, what everyone does. The idea that someone would not, should not, is hardly even raised, except perhaps to mock.

There must be reasons advanced to stem so relentless a tide as that unleashed by the sexual revolution. And many arguments that are advanced in our culture, however sound, are obviously utterly inadequate.

It is true that in the wake of modern sexual license is found misery and destruction of all kinds. It is no surprise really that abortion should flourish in a culture that regards the freedom of sexual

association as a sacred right. Restore sex to marriage and marriage only and you can be sure that abortion would still be illegal in the United States. And it is no wonder that it should be this generation that has been exposed to unprecedented increases in the instance of venereal disease and new killer maladies like AIDS. Take sexually licentious behavior out of the culture and by and large you remove both VD and AIDS. What pornography has done to devastate the lives of men and women, boys and girls, cannot be calculated. But it is certainly as destructive a scourge as heroin or cocaine.

But you can talk about its consequences until you are blue in the face, and you will not overcome the visceral loyalty of this culture and many human cultures today to the ethics of promiscuous sex. Why, we have witnessed recently people in our American government willing to argue that prostitution should not be uniformly condemned, as it is employment in which women can find empowerment and financial freedom. People who think that way, Paul said, have been given over to a depraved mind. They can't think straight. They can't tell right from wrong; indeed, they love what is wrong and hate what is right. And no argument about VD is going to move them. They will rather complain that not nearly enough money is being invested in medical research so that cures can be found for these various sexually transmitted diseases.

No, we need much better arguments. And, particularly, Christians need them. Not first to persuade the world. We may or may not succeed there. But we need to press home arguments to convince Christians themselves that we can make no peace with the world's theory and practice of sex. And that is just what Paul has done here.

We may well ask: do Christians really have to be told not to consort with prostitutes? Do Christians really have to be reminded that fornication is a sin? O yes! We have to be told that over and over again. Temptations are so powerful and so constant that unless our convictions are kept fresh and forceful we will find the world's siren song impossible to resist and we, even we will come to think that there are good reasons for engaging in practices that God forbids and promises to punish. The number of Christian singles – that is men and women who confess evangelical faith – who are, nevertheless, promiscuous has never been higher. Every investigation confirms this. And, surely, the number of Christian husbands and wives who have been involved in some illicit sexual coupling or relationship must similarly be at an all-time high, as, undoubtedly is the number of Christian men who avail themselves of our culture's now ubiquitous pornography.

Oh yes! We need arguments. Strong, irrefutable arguments. We need them all the time and over and over again. If we are going to “flee sexual immorality” as Paul commands us to do, we are going to have to be convinced and remain convinced that we must. As Spurgeon once said, “the best answer to some temptations is a good pair of legs and the king's highway.” But turning away and running in the opposite direction requires in the first place a deep conviction that I must! And for that I need arguments. And Paul has given us the best of them here.

I. The first is that your body is saved by the grace of God and the blood of Christ.

God didn't just love your soul, he loved your body. Christ didn't just save your soul, he saved your entire self: soul and body together. His transforming grace has been given to your body

and Christ's gracious purpose is to raise it to new and everlasting life: partially in this world and perfectly in the world to come. Salvation comes by union with Jesus Christ, and that union includes your body, as Paul explicitly says in v. 15.

Well, says Paul, if that is true, as it is, then you cannot, *you must not ever* indulge the illusion that somehow you can walk with God with your soul and give your body to sin. You are your body and your body is you and they have been joined with Christ in salvation. You cannot divorce what you do with your body from your relationship with Christ. When you use your body to sin sexually, to consort with a prostitute or whatever, you are taking what Christ bled for, what he rose from the dead for, what he has promised to raise to new and everlasting life, you are taking this object of his love and sacrifice and giving it back to the world. You are as much as thumbing your nose at the blood and the resurrection of Jesus Christ when you make the body he saved at such terrible cost to himself an instrument of impurity and infidelity.

We know what a faithful wife feels like when a body that is supposed to belong to her has been given to someone else and we know what a faithful, loving husband thinks when a body that is supposed to be his only is given to someone else. It is usually given, is it not, secretly, surreptitiously because everyone understands that it is a betrayal of a sacred trust. We have seen it and seen what a devastation it is for a spouse to learn that he or she has been betrayed in this way. Why, in generations past, a husband or wife who discovered a spouse *in flagrante delicto* and shot the paramour dead was likely to get off Scot free!

Well, if we regard it as so terrible a betrayal of the spouse himself or herself, how much more, then, brothers and sisters, our Savior, who gave himself for our bodies and their salvation, who loved them with an everlasting love, who paid a price for them so terrible that we cannot begin to calculate it; how much more the Lord Jesus when the body that he has loved is given to another.

But that is what is done. That is exactly what is done when his body is given to sexual impurity. No obfuscation allowed here, none of that self-deceit that we are past masters of. The impure use of our body is a betrayal of our Savior, pure and simple; a betrayal of his love, his sacrifice, his willingness to unite himself to us.

II. Second, Paul says, sexual sins have a peculiar gravity and a peculiar power to corrupt.

However we are to take v.18 Paul plainly is emphasizing the especially egregious character of sexual sin. The Bible often does this. Sodom and Gomorrah were guilty of many sins, but it is their sexual sin that is described in detail, as if it were the measurement of that people's moral collapse. Paul in Romans 1 seems to do a similar thing when he places sexual sins at the bottom of man's descent into debauchery and a total bondage to evil. We recognize this instinctively ourselves. "Immorality" in ordinary use means "sexual sin," even though the term, in the nature of the case, ought to refer to sins of any and every kind.

Dorothy Sayers, the English playwright and novelist recalled a young man once saying to her, "I did not know there were seven deadly sins; please tell me the names of the other six." [D. Coomes, *Dorothy Sayers*, 89] Well, it is only to acknowledge the Bible's own way of speaking to accept that there is something particularly harmful, destructive, and corrupting in sexual sin.

No doubt this is in part because, in the Bible, the sexual relationship between a husband and a wife is such a sacred thing and is designed to produce so much of eternal consequence. No wonder its corruption is regarded as a specially heinous crime.

When you give yourself and your body to sexual impurity you are not at the top of a slope needing to worry lest it prove slippery and take you to the bottom. You are already at the bottom! That is Paul's point in v. 18.

III. *Third, Paul goes on, you are the temple of the Holy Spirit and, as such, are obliged to pay honor to the Spirit who lives in you.*

In some ways this is another version of the first argument, viz. that sexual sin is a betrayal of our relationship to Christ. But the point made here specifically is that *our bodies are inhabited by the Holy Spirit* and, consequently, your body is holy. That is the point that Paul made in 3:16-17 where again he made this argument. The Spirit's presence within you obliges you to pay honor to his holiness with the use of your body. It is not simply foolishness, it is not simply disobedience when a Christian uses his or her body immorally. It is also a form of false religion, even of blasphemy.

Do you remember our Catechism and its treatment of the 3rd commandment, the commandment against taking the name of the Lord in vain? It asks: "What is forbidden in the third commandment?" And the answer goes this way: "The third commandment forbiddeth all profaning or abusing of any thing whereby God maketh himself known." Well that's what someone does when he or she takes the temple of God and puts it to pagan and worldly use. It is just the same sin as Israel committed when she worshipped idols and false gods in the Jerusalem temple, the same sin when she took the ark into battle and lost it to the Philistines, the same sin when she made her offerings to God at high places according to the pagan way. That is what a Christian does when he uses his body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit, to seek after what is displeasing to God.

IV. *Fourth, and finally, Paul adds this consideration: we belong to the Lord and are duty bound to live for him.*

We have been bought and paid for, and we do not any longer possess ourselves. We belong to Jesus Christ and we are his servants, his slaves if you will. If that seems at all harsh, remember slavery to Christ is infinitely better than slavery to sin and death. Every human being is a slave. The question is simply: a slave to whom? And we have a master who loves us and cares for us. The price he paid for us was not money, but his own humiliation, his own suffering, his own agony as he bore the divine wrath against us because of our sins himself, in our place, and, finally, his own death. This slavery is the slavery of love. In this bondage there is perfect freedom. When we do this master's bidding, no one profits so much as we ourselves.

But, the fact remains, we belong to him. He has ownership of our bodies and when we use those bodies in a manner repugnant to him and dishonoring of him we are violating all the obligations of love, of gratitude, of honor, and of duty. Our bodies are not ours to do with as we please. They are Christ's and it is ours to please him with them.

These, then, are arguments to reckon with; arguments that will prevail whenever we raise them in time of temptation. Paul has given them to us and we must now put them to work, over and over again.

It is only to be faithful to the Word of God and to be honest about life as we know it to admit that attaining to the standard of sexual purity required in the Bible requires great struggle. We have too often seen, even among the devout, exquisitely painful and destructive failure. With men especially, there is an exquisite difficulty in remaining pure before God and man. The nature of the male human being has rendered him particularly susceptible to *this* sin. It was a man, Job, who said, “I have made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.” It was Jesus who, in making the point that adultery could be committed as well in the heart as with the body, put it in terms of a man looking lustfully at a woman. Here Paul deals with a man and a female prostitute. There is so much honest admission of this in the literature of the Christian church, most of which, of course, has been written by men. James Fraser of Brea, the Scottish covenanter, wrote in his *Memoirs* [155]: “I find it with me as with the Israelites in Judges, that there were some nations that they could not drive out; so I may say that there are some strong evils that I cannot get mastered...and which continually afflict me, and discourage me.” And every man who reads that assumes that among those evils Fraser is talking about is impure sexual desire.

Why, Jerome, the church father, who acknowledged throughout his life a terribly difficult and discouraging battle on this front, admitted that one of the few real pleasures of old age – that time of life when one is beset with illness and pains of various kinds, when one’s eyesight is fading, gums receding from the teeth, teeth themselves dropping out, digestive problems, trembling hands, and the like – nevertheless there is this one pleasure, that one is finally liberated from the tyranny of sensual desires.

[Kelly, *Jerome*, 295]

Well, temptations as powerful as that, sins as enticing as these sins are, will not be resisted with half-measures. “*Flee* sexual immorality,” Paul commands. And that we might, he gives us reasons that, for any Christian, ought to weigh and weigh heavily. No wonder the threat of judgment for these sins in 6:9. And with such arguments as these to offer on behalf of sexual purity and faithfulness, no wonder that sexual unfaithfulness is regarded as so blatant and horrifying a crime against God, against one’s neighbor, and against one’s own soul.

Now I began to hear the cries of grief,
For I was in a place of many groans –
Outcries of pain, that smote me where I stood,
From out a region blind and void of light,
That bellowed like the sea when churned about
By mighty tempests of opposing winds.
The hellish blast with ceaseless fury rages
To sweep along the spirits in its rush,
Molesting them with constant buffetings,
And when they come before the precipice,

Cries and lamentations strike the air,
 And blasphemies against the Power Divine!
 I learned that to such torment are condemned
 The sinners of the flesh, who vilely yield
 Their reason to their carnal appetite.

As when in times of old the starlings fly,
 Borne on their wings in large and crowded flocks:
 So did that blast convey those wretched souls.
 Now up, now down, now round about they whirled:
 No hope of rest could ever comfort them,
 Or even a moment's lessening of their pain."

[Dante, *Inferno*, canto v]

That is the fate of those who give their bodies over to sexual sin. And what of Christians who honor the Lord with their bodies?

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."